

Chapter Three

Exodus: The Ordeal At Winter Quarters

Nauvoo was in flames. Mobs ran through the streets breaking windows and burning houses. For days a steady line of wagons made their way to the river as the city's population fled into the wilderness. Brigham Young had agreed to vacate the city by the summer of 1846, but still the crazed mobocrats weren't satisfied and began to drive the saints onto the frozen prairie in the dead of winter. The carnage and destruction sickened even the most hard-hearted. Major W.B. Warren of Governor Ford's own militia reported a scene so base that he resigned his commission in disgust. "A man near 60 years of age was dragged from his home, stripped of his clothing and his back cut to ribbons with a whip, for no other reason than that he was a Mormon, and too old and sick to make successful resistance. Conduct of this kind would disgrace a hoard of savages."⁽¹⁾

Joseph took his large wagon and his mother's one horse shay to Webb's Blacksmith Shop to have the wheels tightened before crossing the Mississippi. It was early February, 1846 and the river was choked with floating ice. Ferry boats carried wagons across at great risk, while many head of livestock were drowned and lost. Both Joseph and his brother John risked their lives daily, returning time and again to help the homeless thousands. Joseph had been

charged with getting the large herd of church owned livestock across the river. In his journal Joseph tells how he got one wild steer across in a boat. "While crossing the Mississippi one of the brethren had a sick steer that they couldn't keep on their boat. I told them to drive him on and I would hold him. They drove the steer on at full speed and I caught him by the nose with one hand and with my other arm around his neck I threw and held him until they could rope and tie it to the boat." (2)

John Deans also labored long hours in the icy water, getting thousands of head of sheep, cattle and horses across, as well as helping many of the Saints who couldn't help themselves. Exhausted, sick and nearly frozen from being in the icy water day after day, he caught pneumonia and died alone in the night among the cattle and horses he had risked his life to save. He left his young wife of only one month and a grieving family, still mourning the loss of their husband and father. Joseph was heartbroken over his brother's loss, for they had been close chums, only two years apart in age.

John Deans Murdock was buried in an unmarked Indian grave where Col. Thomas Kane, lifelong friend of the Mormons, had apparently for scientific reasons exhumed an Indian skeleton not long before. Joseph wrote, "We went to the cold springs near Sarpe's Point, where my brother John was buried in an Indian grave where Col. Kane had taken up an Indian skeleton." (3) It was the first Mormon burial west of the Mississippi. It wouldn't be the last, for the bitter trail of tears across Iowa would be marked with countless graves.

The frozen soil of Iowa was stained red with blood as the bone-weary Saints established a crude camp at Sugar Creek, only 9 miles from the Mississippi. Joseph's friend Hosea Stout described a scene typical of many families there. Two of Stout's small sons had already died of "black canker" and scurvy in his arms, and his wife Louisa was near death. "I cannot attempt to express my feelings. Louisa is unable to get about and I have fearful forebodings of coming events. We are truly desolate and afflicted, and entirely destitute of anything to eat, much less nourish the sick." (4)

Oxen's hoofs were split and bleeding, while many of the Saints had no shoes and stumbled along barefoot through the ice and snow. Eliza Snow, wife of Lorenzo Snow and a noted poet of her day later recalled how the women suffered in silence. "The sisters walked all day, and at night prepared supper for their families, with no sheltering tents, and then made their beds under wagons. Forgetting her own fatigue and destitution, she took pains to fix up in the most palatable form their allotted portion of food." (5)

The exodus across the Mississippi and into the frozen wilderness was especially hard for Sally Murdock. She had lost nearly everything of value she owned, and was 67 years old with only her 12 year old son Nymphus to help her, now that both her husband and son John were dead. She had to drive her own little wagon, for Joseph had his own wagon to drive and wife to care for, as well as trying to help others in need. And he had to care for his own livestock as well as that owned by the church.

During one bitterly cold night two of Joseph's oxen fell exhausted and froze to death. It was a disastrous loss for him, for without the oxen he could not move on. A band of Indians had been following the stragling wagon train, stealing whatever the Saints lost along the way. Joseph had a feeling that he could trade something to the Indians for an ox, but he had little to trade. In his journal Joseph tells that he asked his wife Eunice what they could spare, and she said that she had a piece of dress material in her chest. Joseph wrote, "I took the cloth and a peck of corn and set out to get an ox. I found several Indians who had an ox, and I thought the trade was made, when one of them suddenly pointed to my shirt, so I went back to camp without a shirt, but I had an ox!"⁽⁶⁾

How Joseph obtained his second ox is an example of his honesty and willingness to do unto others as he would have them do unto him. It is best described in his own words. "Several days before my ox died, about 4 miles past Sarpe's Point, I had seen several stray oxen, and after we made camp I started back after them. I walked about 6 miles and was driving them back to camp when it became dark and I got lost. I found some high grass and pulled it up and made my bed for the night. I had a sheep skin over my shoulders but no coat or vest, and I dreamed of buffalo robes, for it was very cold. The wolves howled and I thought of camp. When the stars came out I knew where I was and started driving the oxen to camp and got there at sun-up. I learned that the oxen belonged to Brother John Taylor, so Brother George Q. Cannon and I delivered them to him without price, and it was alright."⁽⁷⁾ He had risked his life for two

oxen and then willingly give them up to their rightful owner. John Taylor later became president of the church while George Q. Cannon was First Counsellor to President Wilford Woodruff. Both were life long friends of Joseph.

Joseph's service to John Taylor was mysteriously and perhaps miraculously repaid a few days later. "I was sitting on the ground trying to think how to get another ox when an old man rode up to me on his horse and said, take this horse and saddle over by the river and trade them for what you can get. I said maybe you need them yourself, but he replied, that is none of your business. I got up and rode the horse over to the river where I met Brother Charles Rich. I told him that I needed an ox and he took me to an Indian who had an ox to trade for the horse. I now had a good team, so you can see that I was blessed." (8)

How was it possible for Joseph to meet a total stranger on the prairie, one who would give him his horse to trade for a much needed ox? Who was the stranger and where did he come from? Could he have been one of the Three Nephites? It was just another in the seemingly miraculous events in Joseph's long and adventurous life. He never knew it then, but his trades with the Indians was only the beginning of a lifetime work among the Lamanites.

From their temporary camp at Sugar Creek, Joseph led his family across Iowa to rest awhile at Mount Pisgah, 165 miles further west, and then struggled on to Cutler Park, another cold and dismal winter camp in the wilderness. It was the dead of winter and many suffered frozen limbs or were weak from starvation, for most had been forced to flee Nauvoo with little more than the clothes on their backs.

Jane S. Richards, whose husband was on a mission in England told of the hardships at Cutler Park.

"Our situation was pitiable, I had no food for myself or my children. The severe rain prevented our having a fire, and my little girl was very ill, as I was also. At Cutler Park, after weeks of incredible suffering, my little girl died. A few days before she had asked for some potato soup, the first thing she had shown any desire for in weeks, and as we were traveling we came to a potato field. One of the sisters asked for a single potato for my little girl. A rough woman impatiently heard her story, and then marched her out of the house, saying I won't sell or give a thing to you damned Mormons! I turned on my bed and wept as I tried to comfort my little one in her disappointment. When she was taken from me, I only lived because I could not die." (9)

Cutler Park was located near what was first called Kanesville, named for the friend of the Mormons, Col. Thomas Kane, but was later called Winter Quarters, on the west bank of the Missouri River. The mighty Missouri was crossed with no less difficulty than was the Mississippi, and on its west bank in Nebraska Territory the Saints established their winter quarters. Never have a people suffered more than did the Saints at the place they called Winter Quarters. While waiting for spring to arrive so they could continue on to the Rocky Mountains, they sought solace in Joseph Smith's prophecy of a safe haven in the mountains. But many would never live to see the Rockies, for when they finally moved west they left more than 600 graves behind. Although Joseph and his family survived that awful winter,

he couldn't forget losing his father at Nauvoo, or his brother's lonely grave at Sarpe's Point.

Most of the exiled Saints spent that winter in wagons or tents, but a few dug dugouts or built rude cabins roofed with willows and dirt, whose roofs turned to mud when spring rains came. Those who weren't crippled with frostbite suffered from disease. Perhaps Col. Thomas Kane described their suffering best when he appealed their plight to an uncaring congress. "Dreadful indeed is the suffering of these forsaken beings, bowed and crippled by cold as each weary day and night drags on, almost all of them crippled by disease. They have no homes or hospitals, nor friends to offer them any help. They cannot satisfy the feeble cravings of their sick, they have not bread to quiet the hungry cries of their children. These are the Mormons who only last year numbered 20,000 at Nauvoo, but where are they now? They are last seen carrying in mournful train their sick and wounded and blind, to disappear beyond the western horizon, pursuing the phantom of yet another home."⁽¹⁰⁾ Little wonder the Saints looked forward to a sanctuary in the Rocky Mountains, a safe refuge from their persecutors, as Orson Pratt testified on November 8th, 1845 when he declared, "We do not want one Saint left in the United States after spring!"⁽¹¹⁾

Brigham Young had planned to send a first party westward to the Rocky Mountains with the first green grass, but unexpectedly, and almost unbelievably, the very government which had ignored their calls for help and had allowed them to be driven into the wilderness in the dead of winter now asked for their help. On May 13th, 1846

the United States declared war on Mexico. On June 26th Captain James Allen, representing the U S Army asked Brigham Young to furnish a Mormon Battalion of 500 young men to march into Mexico and defend California. It placed the Mormon leader in a terrible dilemma, for the saints were ready to make the long trip to the Rocky Mountains, and he couldn't afford the loss of all of his youngest and strongest men. But if he refused, he knew that the oft-made charges that the Mormons were unpatriotic would appear to be true.

There were many who felt they had no reason to help a government which had allowed them to suffer the injustices they had suffered. Orson Pratt declared, "The United States asks us to fight their battles in the invasion of Mexico, after having suffered us to be driven from state to state unlawfully and unconstitutionally, at a loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of property and the bloody butchering of scores of innocent men, women and children, driving them from their homes to wander helplessly upon the wild uninhabited places of the west. Now they call upon those same people to leave their wives and children in Indian Territory without food, home or friends, without the least prospect of surviving the coming winter." (12)

Still, in spite of the many abuses they had suffered, when the call came, every able-bodied man volunteered to serve his country, Joseph Murdock among the first. Brigham Young realized he had to allow his volunteers to go, so he agreed to raise the needed battalion, to allay the prejudices of their enemies and prove their loyalty to their government. In his journal Joseph tells how he volunteered when his country asked for his help, as his grand-fathers had in

the Revolutionary War before him, forgetting the abuses and hardships he had suffered at Nauvoo and along the trail to Winter Quarters, even though it meant leaving his wife and mother and younger brother Nymphus alone in the wilderness. "There the Mormon Battalion was called to go fight in Mexico. I went up and asked to go, but Brigham Young wanted me to stay with him and take care of the volunteer's families and their livestock. He asked me and nine others to do this, which we did, herding the stock among the Omaha Indians." (13)

We find a confirmation of Joseph's journal in the diary of Sgt. Daniel Tyler, a member of the Mormon Battalion. "Joseph Murdock, his young wife Eunice, his mother Sally and brother Nymphus started for the Rocky Mountains. While at the Missouri word came that 500 volunteers were needed to fight in Mexico. Like a true patriot Joseph turned his family and property to the care of his brother Nymphus, a mere lad of 13, and volunteered his services to his country. But being an excellent hand with livestock, he was excused by Brigham Young and placed in charge of the cattle of those who joined the Battalion, to drive their livestock across the plains." (14)

Brigham Young recognized Joseph's expertise with livestock, not only then but later along the trail to Zion and after they reached the Rocky Mountains. Organization of the Mormon Battalion forced Young to abandon all hope of sending a wagon train into the mountains that year. It meant spending still another year at Winter Quarters, the place many called Misery Bottoms, where they had suffered so much already, but he knew he couldn't refuse his country's call for help.

parley Pratt of the Council Of The Twelve expressed his frustration at the delay when he said, "There is no chance now to forge on until next year, the lateness of the season, the poverty of the people, but above all the taking away of 500 of our best men compells us to abandon any progress westward. We have to prepare for another winter."⁽¹⁵⁾ It was a hard price to pay, but the Saints remaining at Winter Quarters recognized their patriotic duty and began preparing to spend another dismal winter at the Missouri.

549 volunteers joined the ranks of the Battalion and left Winter Quarters on July 20th, 1846. Unprepared for so long a march, the longest forced infantry march in history, the poorly equipped and ill-fed Mormon Battalion began the almost impossible forced march across the then unknown deserts of New Mexico and Arizona to California. Six months later, after almost unbelievable suffering, the ragged band marched into the village of San Diego to claim California from Mexican rule. Their leader, Col. Philip St. George Cooke honored every man of the Battalion when on January 30th, 1847 he said, "History may be searched in vain for an equal march of infantry, nine-tenths of it through a wilderness where nothing but savages and wild beasts are found, or across deserts where for want of water there is no living creature."⁽¹⁶⁾

At Winter Quarters more than 500 log cabins and several dozen sod buildings were built to help accomodate the great number of Saints who were straggling into that outpost every day, and although it was late in the season, land that had never seen a plow was broken

and crops planted to help feed the hungry. Indians were troublesome and often Joseph went among them to help keep the peace. When several women and children became lost, Joseph had a hair-raising experience getting them out of the hands of the Indians. The Sioux and the Omahas were at war, and no one except Joseph dared go among them.

"I started from Winter Quarters, and during the night the Sioux killed 73 Omahas. I made my way through them as far as Brother Heber Kimball's camp, just as the Indians came down on the camp. It was all we could do to pacify them. I went out into the night to find the missing women and children. There was not a man dared to leave camp with me, they were so frightened. I located several women and a young boy. I started with the boy and had traveled about 5 miles across the prairie when we were caught by the Indians. They were terribly mad. They set their war stakes and held council over us. At last they agreed to let us go if I didn't let the Sioux know where they were. I promised and we left to find the other women and children. I found them and was returning when we again met the Indians. We had a hard time getting free. A couple of the women were struck down. We made out and got away with the help of the Chief. We got away alright and I thanked the Lord for our escape." (17)

We can only wonder what means Joseph used to counsel with the Indians to gain their freedom, but once more he had demonstrated his ability to bargain with the Indians when no one else seemed able to reason with them, a trait that was becoming ever more valuable to himself as well as to Brigham Young and the church.

That second year at the Missouri saw Winter Quarters grow from a few muddy acres of crude huts and dugouts into a sprawling frontier village of rows of neat cabins surrounded by cultivated fields. Life still wasn't easy though, as the more than 600 graves there attested. Everyone was getting ready for the move to the Rockies the following spring, although most knew they wouldn't be among those chosen to go with the first wagon train. Besides readying wagons, preparing food, dry goods and clothing for the trail, detailed plans had to be made, for only a few wagons had ever been taken west, and little was known of the emigrants who had preceeded them.

Joseph was one of those who spent long hours studying early records of previous explorers, as well as the latest maps. As early as 1831 Joseph Smith had prophesied that the Saints would move west to the land of the Lamanites, and in 1842, 1843 and again shortly before his death in 1844 he visualized a sanctuary in the Rocky Mountains where they could live in peace and be safe from their persecutors. In an August 6th, 1842 diary entry Joseph Smith wrote, "I prophesied that the Saints would continue to suffer much affliction, and would be driven to the Rocky Mountains. Many would be apostates, others would be put to death by our persecutors, or lose their lives to exposure or disease, but some would live to go and assist in making settlements and building cities, and see the Saints become a mighty people in the midst of the mountains." (18)

Because of Joseph Smith's prophesies and visions, Brigham Young and the Council Of The Twelve decided upon a location "In the heart of the Great Basin, somewhere across the mountains along the Bear

river or the Great Salt Lake, in some lonely valley in a sequestered place."⁽¹⁹⁾ Some have claimed that the Saints did not know their destination when leaving Winter Quarters, saying that Brigham Young was leading them to Colorado, or California or even to Vancouver Island, but a search of records clearly indicates that their destination was the valley of the Great Salt Lake. In 1843 Joseph Smith told his wife, Emma Mack Smith, "The time is near when we will go beyond the Rocky Mountains"⁽²⁰⁾ and on August 6th, 1846 Brigham Young wrote to President James Polk that he intended to "seek a location west of the Rocky Mountains within the basin of the Great Salt Lake or the Bear River Valley."⁽²¹⁾

John C. Fremont's 1843 map of the Great Salt Lake Valley had been published in the church owned Nauvoo Neighbor in 1844, describing Fremont's explorations there and his return from California by way of Las Vegas Springs, the Virgin and Sevier rivers, Timpanogos (Utah) Lake and the Bear River.⁽²²⁾ Brigham Young had also obtained copies of the latest western maps from Col. Thomas Kane and had talked to every Mountain Man, trader and fur trapper he knew of who had been to the mountains. He knew that "Old Joe" Williams had reported that the Salt Lake Valley was "very promising, where grains could grow" and that there was good feed for stock.

The famed Catholic explorer-missionary Father Pierre De Smet said of the Mormons, "They asked me a thousand questions about the regions I had explored, and the valley I described to them pleased them greatly."⁽²³⁾ The decision to remove to the Great Salt Lake Valley was not just made by chance but was a move as well researched

as the best planned military expedition. And with spring coming once more to Winter Quarters, those chosen to go with the first party were making last minute preparations. When Brigham Young announced the names of those chosen to go, Joseph Murdock's name was among them!

Footnotes - Chapter 3

1. The Mormon Trek West, Pg 65, Joseph Brown, Doubleday, 1980
2. Journal JSM
3. Ibid
4. The Gathering Of Zion, Pg 60, Wallace Stegner, McGraw-Hill, 1964
5. The Mormon Trek West, Pg 8, Joseph Brown, Doubleday, 1980
6. Journal, JSM
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
9. The Life & Times Of Joseph Fish, Pg 22, John Krenkel, Interstate Printers, Danville, Illinois, 1970
10. The Mormon Trek West, Pg 69, Joseph Brown, Doubleday, 1980
11. The Gathering Of Zion, Pg 40, Wallace Stegner, McGraw-Hill, 1964
12. The Mormon Trek West, Pg 51, Joseph Brown, Doubleday, 1980
13. Journal JSM
14. History Of The Mormon Batallion, Daniel Tyler, 1881
15. Autobiography Of Parley P. Pratt, Pg 344, Deseret Book, SLC, 1972
16. History Of Utah, Pg 243, Hubert H. Bancroft, San Francisco, 1889
17. Journal JSM
18. History Of The Church, Vol 5, Pg 85
19. The Mormon Trek West, Pg 44, Joseph Brown, Doubleday, 1980
20. Reminiscences Of William Clayton, who married Joseph Smith
21. The Mormon Trek West, Pg 34, Joseph Brown, Doubleday, 1980
22. Ibid, Pg 86
23. Utah, The Story Of Her People, Pg 72, Milton Hunter, Deseret News Press, 1946